

The shrinking space for civil society in Europe

During its first March 2022 plenary session, Parliament is due to vote on an own-initiative report of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), advocating new measures to protect and boost civil society organisations' participation in the democratic life of the European Union. Acknowledging the contribution civil society organisations (CSOs) make to promoting the EU values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), and in particular fundamental rights, the report recognises the challenges CSOs are facing, not least in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

In recent years, and in particular since the [pandemic](#), CSOs and also private individuals have been facing challenges and [restrictions](#) on civil liberties when trying to participate in and communicate freely about the political and social life around them. In some cases, governments themselves are imposing legal and administrative conditions that make it more difficult for CSOs to operate, owing to a lack of support and funding. This phenomenon is well documented and is referred to as the progressive 'shrinking of civic space'. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)) defines civic space as 'the set of legal, policy, institutional, and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, express themselves, associate, organise, and participate in public life'. In Europe and in the EU several [initiatives](#) have been taken to monitor and counter the steady erosion of civic space. In her 2019 [mission letter](#) to the Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen specifically asked Věra Jourová to maintain 'open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'.

European Parliament position

Over the years, Parliament has consistently stressed the need to build and support a society in which individuals and organised groups can engage and contribute to 'political, economic, social and cultural life'; where freedom of expression and of association are respected; and where civic actors are not deterred but on the contrary are encouraged to exercise their rights. Unfortunately, Parliament also recognises that in recent years the situation has deteriorated on multiple fronts, as underlined in the Fundamental Rights Agency's 2021 [report](#) on protecting civic space in the EU. In the EU, CSOs sometimes face not just negative rhetoric but also hate speech, harassment and stigmatisation, which ultimately has a 'chilling' effect.

Against this backdrop, the LIBE report calls on the Commission to adopt a coherent and structured policy to ensure that civic space in Member States does not deteriorate further. Measures suggested should include, but not be limited to: the creation of a 'European civic space index'; the addition of a dedicated civic space chapter to the Commission's [annual rule of law report](#); and the adoption of a comprehensive civil society strategy. All this should complement the EU sectoral policies already in place, for instance to protect and promote [LGBTIQ+](#) rights, [Roma people's](#) rights, [women's](#) rights, [children's](#) rights, and the rights of [people with disabilities](#), and to combat [racial and ethnic discrimination](#). Overall, Parliament recognises that CSOs not only help to promote EU values and the rule of law but that, under the right conditions, they can also contribute to the single market and social economy. Recently, Parliament has also addressed the use of abusive legal action to [silence journalists, NGOs and civil society](#), and the role played by EU [cross-border associations and non-profit organisations](#) in a healthy democracy.

Own-initiative report: [2021/2103\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: LIBE (Rule 54); Rapporteur: Anna Júlia Donáth (Renew Europe, Hungary).

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